

Stephen Sewell has been responsible for some of the most provocative and electrifying Australian plays of the past 25 years. These include *The Father We Loved on a Beach by the Sea*, *Traitors*, *Welcome the Bright World*, *The Blind Giant is Dancing*, *Dreams in an Empty City*, *Hate*, *Sisters*, *The Garden of Granddaughters and the Secret Death of Salvador Dali*. His influence also extends to the screen for which he has written the screenplays of *Isabelle Eberhardt*, *The Oblivion Seekers*, *The Boys* (which received numerous awards) *Lost Things*, and *Sisters*. He lives in Sydney.

Passion is a word one easily associates with Stephen Sewell and his work: he's passionate about politics; he's passionate about Australian society and identity; he's passionate about the theatre; but above all else, he's passionate about writing and its ability to convey ideas.

Undoubtedly one of the most powerful displays of Stephen Sewell's literary passion was recently witnessed in his highly successful play *Myth, Propaganda and Disaster in Nazi Germany and Contemporary America*. Written in the intellectual, moral and political wake of the post-September 11 world, the play deals with the story of Talbot Finch a Left-wing Australian academic working in American academia who finds himself "dangerously at odds with the prevailing political temperature..." and is consequently thrown into a web of "intrigue and threat" in the anxiety-charged atmosphere of the contemporary American political landscape.

Accordingly, Sewell's use of the theatre in *Myth...* to "give voice to people's secret fears" represents an attempt to present alternative views of the impact of post-September 11 American politics on the world at large; a use of the theatre which is consistent with his desire to offer a critique that was "not going to offered" by the vast bulk of cultural outlets in mainstream Australian society. Indeed, in the wake of the success of *Myth...*, Sewell felt vindicated in his belief that Australian audiences could deal with overtly political themes that rail against the prevailing conformity of establishment thinking. As he reflects, "I felt it was a great honour to serve those people [who seek alternative views] and give them something that they weren't getting anywhere else..."

No doubt Sewell's disappointment with the level of analysis in the mainstream media is also further evidenced in his reflection on the often clichéd treatment which Australian artists and their work receive in the mainstream media. His frustrations with some elements of the media in light of the interview rounds he did at the time of the release of *Myth...* are indeed somewhat acerbically reflected in his comments that, "I don't think I'm a profound thinker, but I do have thoughts and I live in world and the way that that world is concerns me, and those concerns are the intellectual and emotional concerns that inform the work." For Sewell, the *personal* is undoubtedly highly political, "I'm not just an artist whose got a personal problem..."

So what place then does Stephen Sewell perceive as the true domain of the writer in contemporary Australian society?

In setting out on his journey as a writer, Sewell has been steadfast in his commitment to the view that writers can, and do, have a powerful role to play in society in terms of their ability to analyze, critique and reflect society back upon itself. As he explains, "as a writer I wanted to stand for a number of things and one of those things is that writers do have something important to say about society" Accordingly, Sewell believes that the true function of the contemporary theatre is to be the conscience and the intellectual soul of the country as well as "an arena where the concerns, fears, anxieties and desires of the Australian people are exhibited, analyzed and presented, and turned upside down"

To a large extent, however, Stephen Sewell sees Australian theater as having come full circle in its movement from the mainstream to the avant-garde and back again, as the Australian theater movement of 1970's evolved towards the avant-garde and provided space for new and emerging Australian voices who played a pivotal role in establishing an Australian identity for an Australian theatre. Consequently he sees the contemporary theatre in Australia as having returned to a more elite cultural form of "official theatre" as he suggests in his assertion that "subsidised theatre exists [in this country] because the power elite knows that it is an emblem of a civilised society..."

While Stephen Sewell has had his fair share of success with his work for theatre, writing for film is another passion that has lead to critical acclaim for his work. *The Boys* based on Gordon Graham's play, won an AFI Award for Best Screenplay in 1998, and he has written screenplays for numerous films

including his most recent *Lost Things* (2001), a horror film about a “teen surfing holiday gone wrong.”

Despite the appearance - at least on the surface of it - that Stephen Sewell had made a more or less seamless writing transition from stage to screen, Sewell himself suggests that the process was a much more challenging and difficult one for him than it would outwardly appear. As he goes on to explain, “It took me a long time to understand the differences between the two mediums and it took me a long time to get any expertise at either of them...”

So what has been the secret of Stephen Sewell's success in spite of the many ups and downs he has experienced throughout the 27 years of his writing career? “Just sheer orneriness,” suggests Sewell, as well as a great degree of persistence. Undoubtedly persistence is also necessary part of the lot of the artist as Sewell alludes to in his comment that, “Every artist wants to say something about their world and it's an incredibly difficult time to say those things now, a very important time to say those things now...”

And what advice would he offer for young writers and those aspiring to write for the theatre? His primary thoughts are that aspiring young playwrights should “go overseas to escape an increasingly hostile cultural environment here in Australia” and make use of the many opportunities that are available to writers in countries such as England.

With an impressive record of producing highly provocative and challenging work that often critiques the assumptions of the mainstream, Stephen Sewell continues to consolidate his reputation as one of Australia's most engaging writers. No doubt we look forward to listening to a great deal more of what he has to say.

Interview and Story By Marcus D. Niski Copyright 2003.

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